

OFFICIALS MEET ON MALMSTROM COAL-TO-LIQUIDS PLANT

By Karl Puckett

A top official with the U.S. Air Force met with Gov. Brian Schweitzer Tuesday in Helena to discuss details of a proposed \$1.3 billion coal-to-liquids plant at Malmstrom Air Force Base.

William Anderson, assistant secretary of the Air Force for installations, environment and logistics, is scheduled to discuss the project with invited Great Falls government and private sector leaders at a meeting this morning on the base.

The meeting is not open to the general public.

"We're certainly willing to listen but we obviously have some concerns about building a facility of this nature and size so close to the community," said Warren Wenz, chairman of the Committee of 80, a local military lobbying group.

Wenz will be at the meeting.

The Air Force is considering constructing the facility on 400 to 700 acres of land at Malmstrom. If constructed, it would convert coal into liquid such as diesel and aviation fuel.

Schweitzer, a strong supporter of coal-to-liquids technology, said in a telephone interview Tuesday that the project would provide 1,000 jobs without polluting the environment.

"This would be one of the first big commercial plants in the United States," he said.

Schweitzer said the facility is not similar to Highwood Generating Station, a proposed coal-fired power plant east of Great Falls.

The coal-to-liquids plant would not have a smokestack nor would it emit sulfur or mercury, he said.

Moreover, the governor said, the plant would be "carbon-capture ready," meaning it would produce a pure stream of carbon dioxide that could be captured and piped to eastern Montana and used by oil companies in the "enhanced oil recovery" process.

"I've got people who will buy it," Schweitzer said.

However, shipping the greenhouse gas would require a pipeline between Great Falls and Baker, he added.

The coal-to-liquids plant would not use much water, he said.

"It would be like irrigating 30 to 40 acres of alfalfa."

Schweitzer said the plant would be a "starter" facility, producing 22,000 barrels a year to begin with. It would cost \$1.2 billion to \$1.3 billion to construct, employing 2,500 workers during that time.

Anderson approached the governor about a project at Malmstrom after hearing Schweitzer speak at a coal-to-liquids conference in New York City several months ago, Schweitzer said.

Anderson later talked the idea over with the state's congressional delegation.

He said the plant would start the Air Force on the path of using empty space on some of its bases to create a fuel that could help wean the country off foreign oil.

"We can't afford to be curtailed by governments that don't like us," he said.